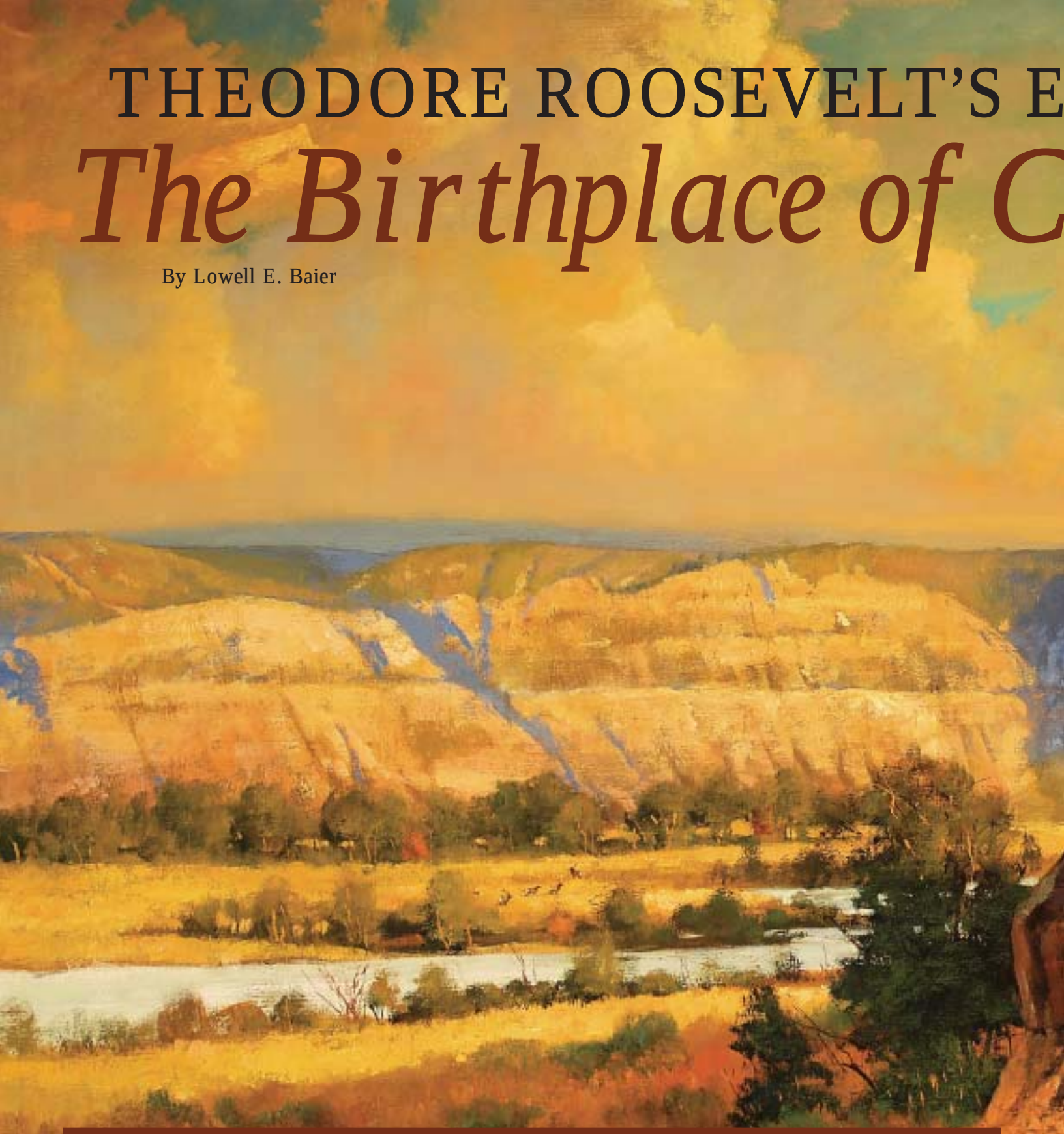
THEODORE ROOSEVELT'S E

The Birthplace of C

By Lowell E. Baier



Editor's note: Earlier this year, the U.S. Forest Service purchased the 5,200-acre Eberts Ranch, across the Little Missouri River from the Elkhorn Ranch house where Theodore Roosevelt lived during his time in North Dakota during the 1880s. What follows is a condensed version of an article titled "The Cradle of Conservation" by Lowell E. Baier, which originally appeared in the Theodore Roosevelt Association Journal, Volume XXVIII, Number 1, Winter 2007, pages 12-24, and is reprinted here with the editor's permission. The Theodore Roosevelt Association Journal is a quarterly publication sent to all members of the Theodore Roosevelt Association. Membership in the TRA is open to anyone interested in the life, accomplishments, ideals, and contemporary relevance of Theodore Roosevelt, the 26th president of the United States. A TRA membership application form is included on page 18 of this magazine.

LKHORN RANCH

Conservation

Louisiana artist Brett Smith produced this painting of Theodore Roosevelt overlooking his Elkhorn Ranch lands in North Dakota's Little Missouri River Valley. The painting, commissioned by Lowell E. Baier, commemorates the acquisition of 5,200 acres of private ranchland that once was part of Roosevelt's Elkhorn Ranch.

America's core value of conservation – i.e., the ethic of husbanding our natural resources for both their aesthetic and material values – evolved at the national level in the early 1870s. Noted historian and author John F. Reiger, in his remarkable study on the origins of conservation in America, "American Sportsmen and the Origins of Conservation," now in its third edition (2001), documents with original research the earliest conservation work of anglers and fish culturists, followed by the foresters, wildlife naturalists and bird watchers, beginning with game protection laws as early as 1708.

The earliest 19th century conservationist efforts were localized New England, site-specific, grass-roots efforts to protect a specific woodland, stream, pond, or species. Localized concerns about protecting and perpetuating a specific natural resource generally resulted in the organization of local sportsmen's clubs to address the issue.

However, the big issues that faced the nation – the broad national-landscape-size challenges of the day – required broad national support to galvanize into action the political will needed to address the monumental threats to America's natural resource base. That resulted in the formation of national associations and organizations which flowed up from the wellspring of early localized groups focused on a single species or site, thus seeding the embryonic notions of conservation in America at the national level. These groups mobilized the political power to legislate the major elements of conservation into national policy, e.g. game laws, national parks, forests, refuges, etc.

In attempting to trace the origins of the notion or idea of conservation, one cannot ignore George Perkins Marsh's 1864 book "Man and Nature," reissued in 1874 as "The Earth as Modified by Human Action," which Lewis L. Mumford calls the "fountainhead of the conservation movement."

Marsh's first book was largely ignored because his attempts to check man's destruction of the country's forests belied America's optimistic belief that its resources were inexhaustible. However, in 1875, just one year after the reissuance of Marsh's book, there was formed the American Forestry Association, which in 1891 promoted, in unison with others, congressional approval for the president to establish forest reserves on public lands.

Over the next 16 years, 194 million acres were set aside by presidents Benjamin Harrison, Grover Cleveland and Theodore Roosevelt. The American Fisheries Society was organized in 1870, and the U.S. Fish Commission was established in 1871. This was the first federal agency created to address the conservation of a specific natural resource; it was later merged into the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

In 1872, America's first national park, Yellowstone Park, was set aside by the Congress "as a pleasuring ground for the people." Sound management of the park, however, didn't occur until passage of the 1894 Park Protection Act and the National Park Act of 1916 establishing the National Park Service, which provided for managed public use "without improvement" of the parks. Lord Bryce said the national park idea developed during this era was the best idea America ever had.

Naturalist writers of the day, in magazines and journals, led the way in focusing popular attention on the broad national landscape issues facing America. George Bird Grinnell and Charles Hallock popularized the word "conservation" in the magazine "Forest and Stream" beginning in 1873, and Grinnell thereafter started the Audubon Society in 1886 and "Audubon Magazine" in 1887, both of which promoted the protection of wildlife and birds.

Theodore Roosevelt founded the Boone and Crockett Club in 1887, making it America's oldest wildlife conservation organization. John Muir followed by organizing the Sierra Club in 1892. As the noted writer, Western historian, and environmentalist Wallace Stegner observed: "Values, both those that we approve and those we don't, have roots as deep as creosote rings, and live as long, and grow as slowly. Every action is an idea before it is an action, and perhaps a feeling before it is an idea, and every idea rests upon other ideas that have preceded it in time…. The tracing of ideas – [in this case conservation] – is a guessing game. We can't tell who first had an idea; we can only tell who had it influentially, [and] who formulated it in a striking way … [so] that others could stumble upon it with the shock of recognition…. Once they reached that stage, [the origin of an idea is] as easy to trace as a gopher in a spring lawn."

The seminal individual who influenced the formulation of the idea of conservation and institutionalized it during this period in the late 19th century, and then implemented many of its very cornerstones during his presidency (1901-1909), was Theodore Roosevelt. His name – then and now – became sacrosanct in and synonymous with conservation. America's public lands policy and its emerging natural resource policies thereafter forever changed from disposition to protection.

Conservation: A Manifestation of the Vanishing Frontier

The notion of conservation which became a core value of America was cultivated during the same period in the late 19th century when the perceived demise of the Western frontier occurred, as characterized in the writing of Theodore Roosevelt's four-volume epic saga of westward expansion, "The Winning of the West" (1889-1896), along with his related books and articles, and by historian Frederick Jackson Turner, who alarmed the nation by declaring the frontier closed in 1893.

Although the conservation movement was in large measure a movement to ensure sustainable production from our prairies, waters, and forests, it was, especially, a manifestation of America's desperate attempt psychologically to hold onto the wilderness of our vanishing frontiers from which we had forged a dynamic part of our national identity and character. Our pioneer spirit symbolizing resilience, toughness, strong-willed rugged individualism, and self-reliance became the unique quintessential American character type forged by the frontier spirit during the conquest of the original 13 states east of the Mississippi River prior to 1803.

This frontier spirit was reinforced and embellished as successive frontiers followed the seven major political expansions of the country's boundaries over the 18th and 19th centuries. Settlers believed that with each "new frontier" came the mandate of manifest destiny to conquer and assert dominion over the wilderness biblically decreed to the Judeo-Christian world by Genesis and Isaiah. The rugged frontiers of the past were the geography of our mind in defining our identity as a nation. Regardless of how we reach out today and interface with our wilderness places, we embrace and hold onto our frontier spirit forged in the 18th and 19th centuries and thereby lay claim to our identity, the essence of the American being, born in the ethos of the perceived loss of the "final" frontier once we reached the Pacific and Alaska. Psychologically, we lose a part of our character and national identity without a mythical frontier mentality. The conservation of our lands – the idea, the act, and the places – became the symbolic manifestation of holding onto the vanishing frontier.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, conservation – the care and husbanding and wise multiple use of our natural resources to

CRAIG BIHRLE

CRAIG BIHRLE

Theodore Roosevelt's Elkhorn Ranch cabin had this view to the east, much of which is now in public ownership. Inset: Looking to the north from the remote Elkhorn Ranch historic site, owned by the National Park Service, in northern Billings County.

enhance the quality of life and provide material value for our people – became institutionalized as one of America's cherished iconic core values.

Two philosophical schools of thought formed on how these precious resources should be utilized. One followed Theodore Roosevelt's wise or multiple use approach, and the other followed John Muir's environmental philosophy that emphasized aesthetic or recreational value to improve the quality of life. However, both had a common objective, i.e., the preservation of our natural resources in perpetuity. Our forests, mountains, plains, prairies and waterways provided wood to build our houses, energy to operate them, forage for our livestock, habitat for our wildlife, and recreational opportunities for our people, i.e., hiking, hunting, swimming, skiing, boating, and the scenic value thereof. These multiple uses came from conservation policies that limited extractive production and restored despoiled landscapes and polluted water and air, drawing upon the nation's resources for both their aesthetic and their material value: Use but don't abuse.

Aldo Leopold elaborated on the concept of balancing conflicting approaches to the use of our natural resources: "The earth is ... a community to which we belong, not a commodity it is our privilege to exploit." The transition continues today from the notion that man is master of the earth separated from nature with the biblical authority of manifest destiny to conquer it, to the notion that man is simply an important participant in the greater web of life.

The conservation movement continued throughout the 20th century in reality and mythology, rooting itself deeper into America's consciousness and identity. In 1934 The Wilderness Society was organized by Aldo Leopold, Bob Marshall and others to take conservation to its next level of refinement – the designation of primitive areas as "wilderness" by congressional edict. Leopold's posthumous "A Sand County Almanac" published in 1949 became a manifesto igniting yet another revolution within the short history of the conservation movement in America. President John F. Kennedy tapped into this theme in the 1960s when he called on the country to forge "new frontiers."

From this period a new zeal was generated to protect public lands as wilderness, completely unimpaired by mankind, which Wallace Stegner calls the highest refinement of the national park idea since the turn of the century. From this flowed the Wilderness Act of 1964 and the National Wilderness Preservation System, the National Trails System, National Wild and Scenic Rivers Systems, the Land and Water Conservation Act of 1964, the initial 1966 Endangered Species Act (later modified and expanded), and the National Environmental Policy Act of 1970.

Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring," published in 1962, made it clear that pollution was a principal conservation challenge of the future, and the Federal Water Quality Control Act of 1965 and Clean Water Restoration Act of 1966 promptly followed, together with a host of laws to protect the environment from toxic wastes and industrially polluted air and water. The era of preservationist environmentalism and a total revolution within America's conservationist consciousness had begun. The frontier mentality which President Kennedy exploited and from which the wilderness preservation concept flourished continues to define our national identity and conduct, a manifestation of our continuing attempt to recreate or reclaim the frontiers of our past.

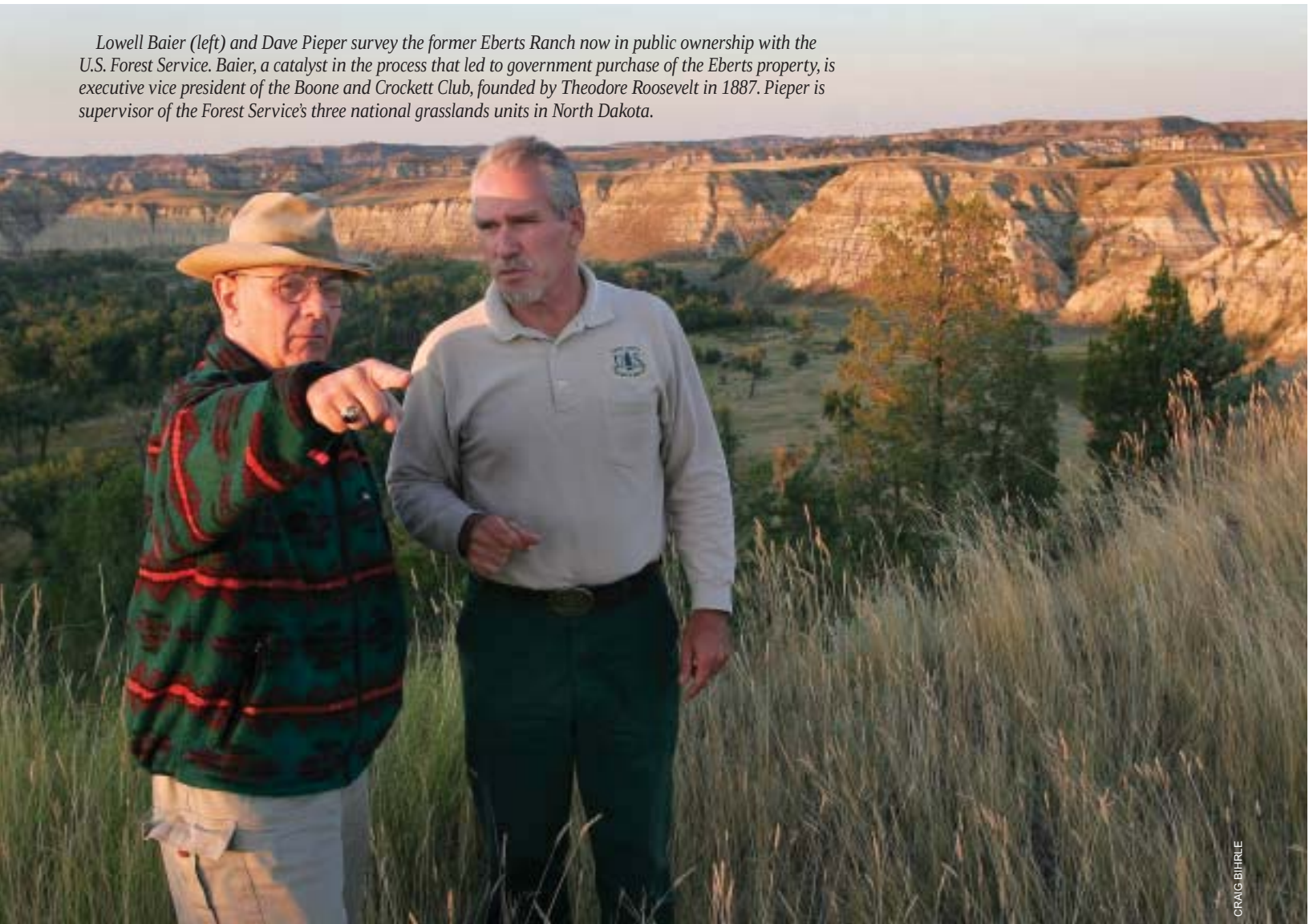
Today no other country in the world enjoys the unique legacy we cherish in our national parks, forests, wildlife and bird refuges, waters, and wilderness systems. These are nature's cathedrals where we reconnect with the universe and find peace and solitude, refuges for the redemption and repair of our souls. In these still places we find the vestigial heart of America's wilderness and the spirit of the frontier, long ago extinguished by the conquest of the West, yet coveted almost as a spiritual ideal or civic religion that gives strength to our very identity as an independent and free nation. This is why we embrace our national parks, forests, waterways, etc. with the passion and care and protection we harbor for these precious natural resources. In these wild places our subconscious mind finds America's now mythical frontier still alive and well and challenging – realized in both actuality and spirit.

Author and historian Wallace Stegner eloquently synthesizes the connection between the forging of our national identity and the Western frontiers of an earlier century. "The remaining Western wilderness is the geography of hope…. [It] is hope's native home ... The American character has been largely shaped by the experience of successive frontiers.... Every time we go off into the wilderness, we are looking for that perfect primitive Eden…. All human endeavor has to come back to the wilderness for its justification and its new beginnings…. The result [is] the tendency to see the West in its mythic enlargement rather than as it is, and the corollary tendency [is] to take our clues from myths in an effort to enhance [our] lives."

In a recent article, Edward J. Renehan, Jr., an author and Theodore Roosevelt scholar, commented on Roosevelt who himself made this very connection between conservation and our national identity:

> *Roosevelt likewise saw good stewardship of wild lands and wildlife as exercises in preserving the national identity of the United States. As Roosevelt pointed out on more than one occasion, the United States lacked the long political and cultural history found in other nations located on other continents. For this reason, Roosevelt argued that Americans must rely on the natural landscape of North America to form the backbone of their culture. Natural history was, after all, an important ancient element in the country's otherwise brief past. In this spirit, Roosevelt insisted that Yosemite and other great natural monuments must be left untouched forever…. [Roosevelt said] "they should be saved because of reasons uncon-*

Lowell Baier (left) and Dave Pieper survey the former Eberts Ranch now in public ownership with the U.S. Forest Service. Baier, a catalyst in the process that led to government purchase of the Eberts property, is executive vice president of the Boone and Crockett Club, founded by Theodore Roosevelt in 1887. Pieper is supervisor of the Forest Service's three national grasslands units in North Dakota.



CRAIG BIHRLE

nected with any return in dollars and cents. A grove of giant redwoods or sequoias should be kept just as we keep a great and beautiful cathedral. The extermination of the passenger pigeon meant that mankind was just so much poorer, exactly as in the case of the destruction of the cathedral at Rheims."

The Birthplace of Conservation

Theodore Roosevelt's name is synonymous with the word conservation. He is the acknowledged father of conservation in America. His commitment to conserving our natural resources was conceived and born during his 3 1/2 years (1883-1887) of ranching and traveling in the Dakota and Montana territories, and his travels in the West thereafter.

His home ranch – the Elkhorn – was established and built on the banks of the Little Missouri River, 22 miles north of Medora, North Dakota, in what is today Billings County. Roosevelt sought solitude and refuge in the remote badlands of the Dakota Territory to repair his soul and heal from the emotional trauma of losing his wife and mother, who died of unrelated causes in the same house and on the same day, St. Valentine's Day, February 14, 1884, in New York City.

CRAIG BIHRLE

Mule deer are part of the rich diversity of wildlife on the Elkhorn Ranch and in the surrounding northern badlands.

During his time in the badlands, Roosevelt traveled by horseback extensively through what is today Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, and the Dakotas. He came to recognize how vulnerable the Western lands were to the uncontrolled predation of man. He witnessed first-hand the destruction and pillaging of the West by rapacious logging and mining which polluted the rivers and despoiled the landscape; the decimation of game by commercial hunting for the purposes of feeding the laborers building the transcontinental railroads, the loggers, and the miners; the denuding of the prairies by stockmen overgrazing their sheep and cattle herds; and the pillaging of what was then its only national park – Yellowstone – set aside a mere decade earlier. Roosevelt wrote extensively about his experiences and the realizations that led to his devotion to conservation in America in six books between 1885 and 1907. Roosevelt's experiences in the badlands and Montana Territory later resulted in his reputation as "the first conservation president," so characterized by his renowned contemporary and Pulitzer-Prize-winning biographer Edmund Morris:

TR once famously remarked, "If it had not been for my years in North Dakota, I would never have become President of the United States." In making this statement [Roosevelt] was alluding not only to the lessons in democracy he learned as a youthful rancher living on equal terms with pioneer settlers in the Badlands. He was also speaking of the dawning of his conservationist conscience, an attitude of reverence for the western wilderness, which succored him both spiritually and physically even as he saw how threatened it was by the spread of interstate commerce. This conscience, born in North Dakota, made him our first great conservationist-President.

Morris has further characterized the dawning of Roosevelt's environmental conscience at the Elkhorn Ranch in the badlands:

As one of many guardians of Theodore Roosevelt's memory, [the Badlands are the] very sanctuary where his environmental conscience matured. It is true that he was a nature lover long before he built the Elkhorn Ranch here, but it was not until he settled in the Badlands and discovered the vulnerability of this fragile ecology to profit-seekers from outside, that he began to ponder the policies that culminated in his unsurpassed achievements as our first conservation President.

To my mind, there is no memorial of marble or bronze anywhere in the country that evokes the conscience of Theodore Roosevelt as powerfully as the Elkhorn bottom and its surrounding hills. It is a crucible of calm, a refuge from the roar of worldly getting and spending. The very disappearance of the ranch TR built here – except for a few foundation stones – emphasizes the transitoriness of human achievement, and the eternal recuperative powers of nature….

I fear in particular the most subtle and uncontrollable of all invasions of the wilderness, namely, noise…. Theodore Roosevelt ... was acutely responsive to the beauty of natural sounds, and indeed to that tapestry of almost inaudible rustlings and ripplings which we clumsily call "silence." The Elkhorn bottom is one of the few places I know where a pilgrim becomes aware of this tapestry, and bears it as background to the beatings of his own heart.

The Elkhorn Ranch and Theodore Roosevelt National Park

Theodore Roosevelt National Park was established in the badlands of North Dakota in 1934 as a regional park, which in 1947 became a memorial park and later in 1978 a national park, to symbolize and memorialize Roosevelt's leadership and conservation legacy. Topographically the park's 70,229 acres are divided into two units (each bisected by the Little Missouri River) which are separated by some 35 miles.

Right in the center of the badlands between the two units is a 218-acre third unit where Roosevelt's Elkhorn Ranch buildings were

WILL KINCAID

The Elkhorn Ranch acquisition was officially dedicated September 15 in Medora, North Dakota. Deputy Secretary of the Interior P. Lynn Scarlett (left) attended, as did North Dakota Governor John Hoeven (center) and former Governor Ed Schafer, to celebrate the preservation of this unique piece of the United States' landscape.

located, also on the banks of the Little Missouri River, which was acquired in 1947.

Surrounding this 218-acre parcel are private ranches, state lands divided into state school lands and state historical society lands, national grasslands, Bureau of Land Management lands, etc. The largest remnant of Roosevelt's Elkhorn Ranch still in private hands was a 5,200-acre ranch owned by the Eberts family, with grazing privileges on an adjacent 18,349-acre allotment in the Little Missouri National Grasslands. This ranch lies directly across the Little Missouri River from Roosevelt's Elkhorn Ranch house, and provides the viewshed Roosevelt wrote so eloquently about.

In describing the badlands around the Elkhorn Ranch, Theodore Roosevelt said:

> *I grow very fond of this place, and it certainly has a desolate, grim beauty of its own, that has a curious fascination for me. The grassy, scantily wooded bottoms through which the winding river flows are bounded by bare, jagged buttes; their fantastic shapes and sharp, steep edges throw the most curious shadows, under the cloudless, glaring sky; and at evening I love to sit out in front of the hut and see their hard, gray outlines gradually grow soft and purple as the flaming sunset by degrees softens and dies away; while my days I spend generally alone, riding through the lonely rolling prairie and broken lands.*

Roosevelt's insights which led to his conservation philosophy were forged here at the Elkhorn, which in turn gave rise to the American conservation movement as we know it today. Later in life, he stated, "Had it not been for the years spent in North Dakota and what I learned there, I would not have been President…. Here, in the hills and plateaus, the romance of my life began."

The boundaries of Roosevelt's ranch are not known exactly since out of necessity he grazed his cattle over a wide area of the badlands; but, Roosevelt wrote in 1888, "My home-ranch lies on both sides of the Little Missouri, the nearest ranchman above me being about twelve, and the nearest below me about ten, miles distant."

The Eberts Ranch, which lies directly across the Little Missouri River from Roosevelt's Elkhorn Ranch house, was once the central part of the Elkhorn Ranch.

As Roosevelt grazed his cattle and hunted far and wide over the badlands, he wrote profusely about his experiences on the Eberts Ranch:

> *My home-ranch… derives its name, "The Elkhorn," from the fact that on the ground where we built it were found the skulls and interlocked antlers of two wapiti bulls who had perished from getting their antlers fastened in battle…. The ranch-house stood on the brink of a low bluff overlooking the broad shallow bed of the Little Missouri, through which at most seasons there ran only a trickle of water, while in times of freshet it was filled brimful with the boiling, foaming, muddy torrent…. The river twisted down in long curves between narrow bottoms bordered by sheer cliff walls, for the Bad Lands, a chaos of peaks, plateaus, and ridges, rose abruptly from the edges of the level, tree-clad, or grassy, alluvial meadows. In front of the low, long ranch-house veranda was a row of cottonwood-trees with gray-green leaves which quivered all day long if there was a breath of air. From these trees came the far-away melancholy cooing of mourning-doves, and little owls perched in them and called tremulously at night. In the long summer afternoons we would sometimes sit on the piazza, when there was no work to be done, for an hour or two at a time, watching the cattle on the sand-bars, and the sharply channeled and strangely carved amphitheatre of cliffs across the bottom opposite … a strip of meadowland, behind which rises a line of sheer cliffs and grass plateaus. This veranda is a pleasant place … gazing sleepily out at the weird looking buttes opposite, until their sharp outlines grow indistinct and purple in the afterglow of the sunset.*

Roosevelt's words are describing the very property and viewshed purchased by the U.S. Forest Service on April 25, 2007. Ironic as it may seem, this very viewshed Roosevelt looked at every day over the Little Missouri River as he sat on the veranda of his Elkhorn Ranch house has never been included in the national park or placed in public protection. Edmund Morris has reflected upon its significance:

> *Here one of our greatest Presidents repaired his soul, and acquainted himself with nature and the common man, after tragedies that might otherwise have struck him down. It is every bit as precious a public heirloom as Valley Forge and Ford's Theater, and its fragile beauty makes it particularly vulnerable to private profiteering and temporary expediency. In fifty years, when the oil trucks stop rolling, they will have other sources of supply [sic]; but if [the] Elkhorn is slashed across with concrete now, it cannot hope to recover…. You will honor his memory best by leaving the site undisturbed and undeveloped, so that its remoteness, tranquility, and silence … its eloquent purity … may speak for themselves, as they once spoke to him.*

The Elkhorn Ranch is where the very legacy of the American conservation movement started – in the badlands of North Dakota. It is part of our cultural history and heritage. This is America's legacy to

preserve, and North Dakota's to celebrate, because this is where our country's conservation movement was inspired, conceived and born.

One could call the Elkhorn Ranch the very cradle of conservation in America, the sacred ground of the conservation movement, a tangible arcadian icon of America's cultural identity, which has been called "the Walden Pond of the American West." Now that the Elkhorn Ranch viewshed is completely in federal ownership and protected in perpetuity, the Elkhorn can truly join the list of other treasured historic sites of national significance and reverence that symbolize and define our unique American culture and identity.

LOWELL E. BAIER of Bethesda, Maryland is executive vice president of the Boone and Crockett Club. Baier is also a founding member of a group called the Friends of the Elkhorn, which organized a national fundraising campaign involving many conservation organizations and private companies to raise $500,000 to help secure purchase of the Eberts Ranch by the U. S. Forest Service. For this effort and many others, Baier was nominated as one of four finalists for the prestigious 2008 Conservationist of the Year Award sponsored by Budweiser, in partnership with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.

Forest Service Assessing Future of Elkhorn Ranch Lands

The U.S. Forest Service finalized purchase of the former Eberts Ranch in April 2007. The 5,200 acre ranch is now part of the Little Missouri National Grasslands, one of three national grasslands units in North Dakota managed from the forest service's Dakota Prairie Grasslands office in Bismarck.

The national grasslands are public lands managed under a multiple use management philosophy that includes recreational uses such as hiking and hunting, minerals exploration and development, watershed protection, livestock grazing, and wildlife and vegetation management. A portion of the Maah Da Hey Trail traverses the ranch and a few oil and gas wells presently operate on the property. The Eberts Ranch also had access to an adjacent 18,000 acre national grassland grazing allotment. As a condition of the acquisition, the forest service agreed to honor a grazing lease for the ranch and associated allotments through 2009.

For the next two years, few changes are anticipated on the newly acquired land, according to Dave Pieper, Dakota Prairie Grasslands supervisor. If anything, the forest service may close some roads and begin the process of restoring cropland back to grassland.

In the meantime, the forest service will develop a plan for future management of the Elkhorn Ranch lands and associated national grassland allotment. During September, Dakota Prairie Grasslands held three open houses to begin gathering input on how the public would like to see these lands managed.

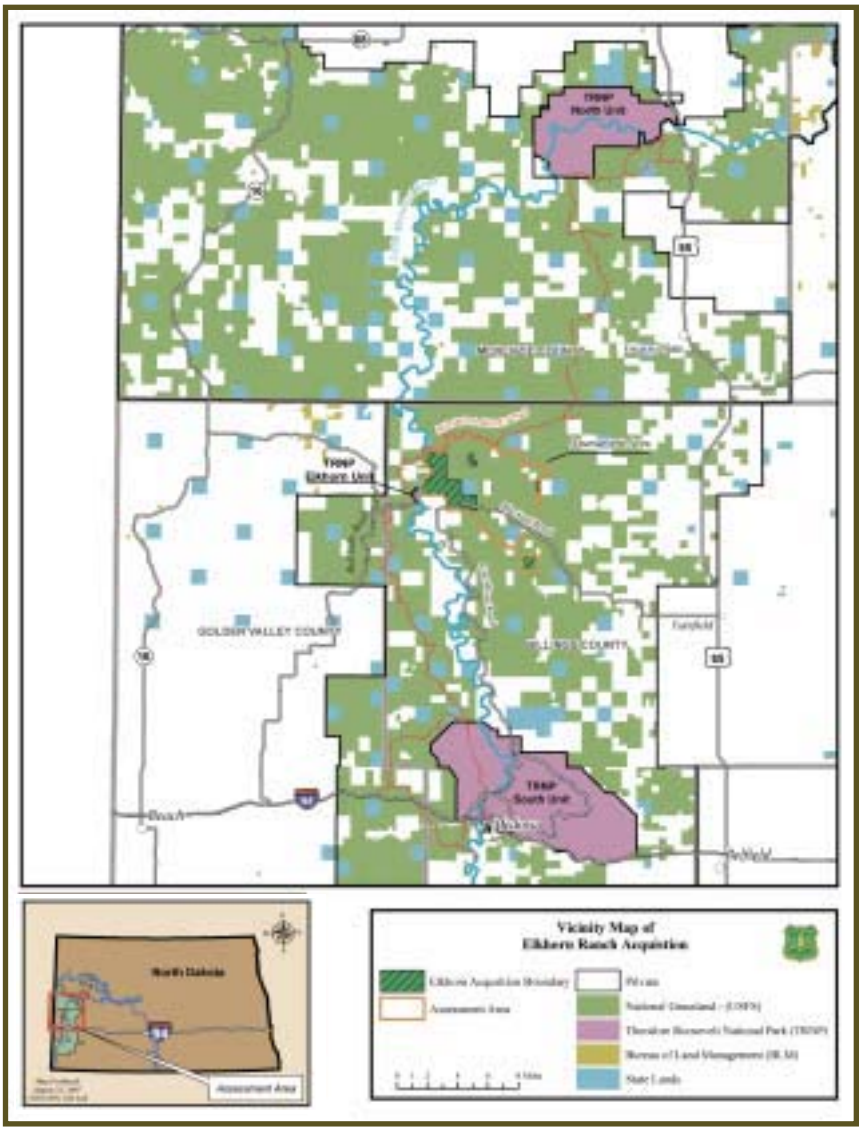
In addition, Dakota Prairie Grasslands is accepting written comments through October 30, 2007. People can voice their views to: comments-northern-dakota-prairie@fs.fed.us.

Mailed comments should go to: Dakota Prairie Grasslands, ATTN: Brenda Quale, NEPA Coordinator, 240 W. Century Ave., Bismarck, ND 58503.

Based on the volume of comments, more open houses may be held in November. By then, the forest service should have completed its initial resource assessment and will report back what people have said regarding management preferences.

Once an initial proposed action for management is developed in early 2008, the National Environmental Policy Act process begins, which involves more opportunity for public input and study.

One of the possibilities under consideration, Pieper said, is the forest service would create some type of special management prescription in concert with the National Park Service to protect the viewshed from Theodore Roosevelt's Elkhorn Ranch site. Another possibility is to use the Elkhorn Ranch grazing allotments to provide flexiblity to all grazing association members during times of drought, fire, and restoration of other grazing allotments.



Many other national grasslands throughout the country have grazing areas set aside for use during times of need or restoration. It's a possibility the forest service should consider, Pieper said. The acquisition of the Eberts Ranch creates this opportunity because the lands are not allocated to any one family or ranching operation. It could become a common area for all members' use. Maintaining and improving wildlife habitat and providing quality hunting opportunities will also be considered in the planning process, Pieper added.

– By *North Dakota OUTDOORS* staff